

PREFACE

A COMPLEX HISTORY: THEME AND VARIATIONS

This book will address a very complicated question and is thus divided into 10 chapters that will discuss the spiritual life of the Chinese people from various angles, as well as an Introduction and Conclusion. Because of the number of the chapters, and the fact that they are linked together rather than being clearly separated, readers may feel a certain confusion when they begin to read. The point of this preface is to provide a bit of guidance and to help readers understand the relationships between the chapters, as well as to provide an overall description of the book.

In the Introduction, I begin by mentioning Feng Youlan 馮友蘭 (1895–1990) and Fei Xiaotong 費孝通 (1910–2005), two scholars who have already devoted a great deal of effort to this topic. Feng Youlan composed six works known collectively as *Purity Descends, Primacy Ascends: Six Books*,¹ the goal

1 *Purity Descends, Primacy Ascends: Six Books (Zhenyuan liushu 貞元六書)* is a collection of six related books written by Feng during the Sino-Japanese War. The books include *A New Philosophy of Principle* 新理學 (1939), *A New Treatise on Practical Affairs* 新事論 (1940), *A New Treatise on the Way of Life* 新世訓 (1940), *A New Treatise on the Nature of Man* 新原人 (1943), *A New Treatise on the Nature of Dao* 新原道 (1945), and *A New Understanding of Words* 新知言 (1946). These books have not yet been translated into English. —Trans.

of which was to seek to construct a modern Chinese view of the universe or a perspective on life after the chaos of the Sino-Japanese War. He worked as a philosopher, drawing on the history of Chinese thought and extending it to new concepts. By contrast, Fei Xiaotong began with observations based on his sociological fieldwork, bringing into focus how the structures of Chinese towns and villages came together to form communities. What I will attempt to do is to begin from the foundation established by these two scholars and seek to clarify Chinese ideas concerning the universe, human life, and nature, from traditional times down to the present day. These ideas influence how Chinese people organize their lives and sort out the problems of being human.

I look at these questions from the point of view of everyday people, which naturally gives us something quite different from the subtleties that would emerge from discussions with philosophers, thinkers, or theologians. Everyday people's ideas about spiritual life are largely inherited from tradition. In applying this inheritance to practical life, they may make their own choices or offer their own explanations. So the ideas of the everyday people cannot be grouped together with the exalted subtleties of the scholarly elite. Nonetheless, these general principles come together to form a whole. The culture that everyday people understand concretely and profoundly influences most Chinese people in terms of their relationship to nature, to other people, and to society as a whole. In Chapter I, I take pains to describe the life of the Chinese people, their life rhythm in this vast space defined by heaven, earth, and nature, and the relationship of this life to our culture and literature. This provides the macro-background necessary to understanding Chinese spiritual life.

In Chapter II, I argue that the spiritual life of the Chinese people revolves around ideas of being "human." This orientation of the Chinese cultural tradition is quite different from Western, Judeo-Christian culture, which is centered on "God." From this perspective, I hope that readers will also appreciate the many links between this chapter and Chapter III, which is devoted to "legends." The creation myth in Chinese legends—that of Pangu creating the earth and the sky—tells the story of a universe

that generates itself, without a transcendent creator. As Pangu's body took form, it created the mountains and the rivers, and the heaven and earth Pangu carried on his head were our blue skies and great land. Pangu was not created, nor did Pangu continue to manage or rule the universe once it was created. The creator of the universe and the universe itself are coequal, and this distinction between China and the West determined that the standpoints of the two cultural systems concerning how to manage the world, how to manage people, and how to orient oneself in the world are all different. China takes "humans" as the subject while the West takes "God" as the subject.

Chapters II and III discuss the Chinese people's view of the universe. From the Spring and Autumn period, the axial age of Chinese culture which extended from roughly 770 to 476 BCE, this view of the universe combined worship of nature with worship of ancestral spirits, or in other words, it combined nature and human life in a spatial relationship, defined at the top by heaven, earth, sun and moon, and extending down to the human realm, and subsequently into the human body, forming a great four-level network. In terms of time, it saw past and present, and even human life before birth and after death, as a process of continuous flow. Space and time were linked together in a vast system where all elements engaged in multiple interactions; among these varied elements, there were both interactions at all levels of the structure, but also particular interactions among certain clearly identified factors, such as yin and yang, or the five elements, or similar variables, so that the vast universe became an order of interaction between each part and each element.

Chapter IV continues the discussion of this interactive order, which is in constant change, with change tending toward equilibrium, arguing that the universe is process and that the process is the universe itself—the two are inseparable. This complements the argument from Chapter III concerning the elements in constant change, arguing that the equilibrium achieved at each stage is only temporary; none of the variables can become either too strong or too weak. Similarly, change is continuous, and each phase takes form for a very limited amount of time. Hence, variation

between stability and stagnation, change and vitality, occurs in time. There is never an eternal form, nor is there persistent change without direction. The ideas discussed in Chapter IV and Chapter V are all directly reflected in our everyday lives, so in Chapter IV, I use various examples drawn from topics such as food and medicine. In Chapter V, I explain the Chinese people's behavior through subjects like the Eight Trigrams, divination, fortune-telling, and *fengshui*,² illustrating how people attempt to acquire a certain agency or control in their dealings with nature through ways of thinking that are similar to science, or which imitate science.

Chapter VI, like Chapter I, focuses on life itself, its meaning as existence and in action. The focus of Chapter VI is on seeing life as made up of many lives, beginning from when my parents give birth to me, and continuing until after my death, and even my passage to another world—an after-life which, in fact, is an extension of the existing world: this is in fact a truer vision than what we think of as linear time. By contrast, in Chapter I, when I talk about aesthetics, my focus is on people's relation to nature in natural space, their “contract,” their mutual engagement. The process of production in an agricultural culture must be in step with the seasons, and must coordinate with the natural environment. Given the intimate relationship between humans and nature, in legends, all things in the universe are seen as having life, and the mountain gods and river spirits, the snake spirits and fox fairies, are all reproductions of humans. Once they have breathed in the essence of heaven and earth, they can be transformed into human bodies.

2 The Eight Trigrams (*bagua* 八卦) refer to the hexagrams that appear in the ancient *Book of Changes* and which are used to predict the future. The word “divination” in the Chinese original is *zhanbo shushu* 占卜術數, a particular form of divination sometimes referred to as “Chinese astrology.” “Fortune-telling” in the Chinese text is *xiangming* 相命, and can refer to any number of techniques, including face reading and palm reading. *Fengshui* 風水, or Chinese geomancy, seeks to use energy forces to harmonize people with their surrounding environments. —Trans.

Chapters VII and VIII are again linked together. What I talk about in Chapter VII is Chinese society—using the Taiwanese society with which I am familiar—and I explain how everyday people understand all kinds of natural phenomena through the act of offering sacrifices. In the past, all people who accumulated virtue became intimately connected with objects of worship. The subject of Chapter VIII is thus to take a look at institutional religions—the thought systems of Confucianism, Daoism and Buddhism, as well as some of their off-shoots—and examine how they interacted, how they coordinated, and how they continually absorbed elements from other beliefs. For example, ideas of karmic rebirth, salvation and revelation were ultimately absorbed into Chinese society in Taiwan and Hong Kong, becoming part of the secular life practice of the people.

Chapter IX begins with pre-war traditional Chinese society, and looks at how people dealt with matters in towns and villages so that they could help one another, take care of one another in times when aid from the state was not forthcoming, and thus assure the village's long-term stability. The commonly held values of the Chinese people, based in their spiritual life, facilitated the intimate, harmonious integration of an individual's values through the concrete practices of group life.

The final chapter begins with legends and aesthetics and continues on to a discussion of novels. This topic is slightly different from the basic focus of a book that examines the beliefs of the common people. Novels are works written by individual authors; and although not all of these authors belonged to the elite intellectual class, they still saw the world, human life, and human complexity from their own perspectives. Their viewpoints and arguments were their own, and not necessarily shared by the people at large. For this reason, I tried my best to choose popular works, such as *The Water Margin*, *The Romance of the Three Kingdoms*, and various crime novels, as well as a few well known works that are popular in opera and in the general culture. All of the works that I choose have been in circulation in Chinese culture for a very long time and have been enjoyed by many readers; their popularity can be considered the common property of popular culture. Thus while from this perspective

the nature of the last chapter is somewhat different from the preceding chapters, and its appreciation of the nature of Chinese culture reflects that of particular intellectuals, at the same time this appreciation was also shared by everyone.

In the Conclusion, I share my thoughts that 21st-century Chinese people have been greatly influenced by modern, Western civilization, and yet remain outside of Western culture. At present, Western civilization itself, as represented by Europe and America, is on the verge of a great change. The problems they are facing, including various crises of alienation and separation from nature, are—in terms of their basic origins—problems for which Western civilization lacks the resources to arrive at a solution. Thus, in the Conclusion, I both sum up the various points discussed in the course of the book, and also propose that Chinese culture, centered on the person and on the idea of close, interdependent relations between humans and nature, might offer a solution. The idea is to integrate the features of Chinese popular culture into modern civilization to solve the dilemmas of this civilization. Can one person's humble opinions be of use? I don't know, but my dream is to act as the Chinese mythical bird who sought to fill the ocean with pebbles, or like the foolish old man who tried to move the mountain: they undertook such tasks even though they knew that success or failure is not decided by weighing the risks.